



formerly The Women's Center of Greater Danbury

Matt Austin, The Center for Empowerment and Education  
Appropriations Committee Public Hearing  
February 24, 2023

My name is Matt Austin and I am the Director of Community Impact at The Center for Empowerment and Education. Located in Danbury, we are the sole Domestic and Sexual Violence Resource Center serving Upper Fairfield and Lower Litchfield Counties. We provide no-cost support services to victims and survivors 24/7/365. I am writing in support of the provision in H.B. No. 6659 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025 to enhance funding for victim service providers.

This funding provision is a direct result of the devastating loss of Victim of Crimes Act (VOCA) funds that support our work providing comprehensive, no-cost and trauma-informed services to victims of domestic and sexual violence. VOCA funds, which are generated from federal criminal fines and fees, are at an all-time low due to fines being redirected to the General Treasury under the previous administration. While the current administration signed the "VOCA Fix" bill in 2021 to correct this issue, VOCA funds have continued to lag and are not expected to reach previous funding amounts.

We thank Governor Lamont for his proposal to include a \$13.175 million allocation to the Judicial Branch to supplement the lack of federal VOCA funds in Connecticut. These funds ensure victims have access to critical support, counseling, advocacy, and help to navigate the complex criminal justice system. The Center for Empowerment and Education receives pass through VOCA funding as a member of The Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence and Connecticut Coalition Against Domestic Violence and would not be able to continue to provide these unique and vital services without the VOCA budget allocation.

VOCA funds all our Family Violence Victim Advocates (FVVA) who provide critical support to victims when they need it most and when it is most dangerous. These advocates work day in and day out at our local courts to provide support and advocacy to those navigating the criminal justice system. Last year our advocates provided 3,336 victims with enhanced legal advocacy, including securing protective orders, restraining orders, visitation rights, housing, custody and child support. This is a 7% increase in victims served from the previous year and the number of those seeking help is only increasing.

A recent example of the daily help we are providing is as follows - The FVVA provided counseling and reassurance for a victim in a conflicted position because she wanted the defendant to serve jail time for an atrocious assault, yet she also wanted to keep her children shielded from the extent of the violence from their father. The FVVA helped the victim identify the pros and cons of both options and allowing her to make an informed decision for herself. Afterwards, the FVVA connected the victim with counseling services and assistance with OVS for compensation for medical bills from the assault. Although the victim had come in-person to court to address her position for the pending case, she was able to receive additional support from the FVVAs with help for her housing/eviction assistance, counseling, and safety planning. Client eventually was rehoused safely as client was provided with housing assistance through CEE counselor's efforts to provide more support, stopping the eviction process that was initiated.

Currently, VOCA provides enough funds for 3 full time FVAs at our organization. Even working full time, that is still not nearly enough to provide services for all who seek them. A 50% reduction in funding would mean we would only be able to serve half as many, which is a step in the wrong direction. I urge you to support the Governor's proposed use of funds to ensure that the loss of VOCA funds does not harm victims and survivors or sexual violence in our state who will not be able to receive the services we provide anywhere else. Support and access to services are critical for survivors to heal and to mitigate further harm to individuals and communities.

We would be glad to provide a tour of our facilities and sit down with anyone who might want further information on all of the services we provide. We are not looking for an increase in funding at the moment; we would just like to maintain the level we are currently operating at. Thank you for your support of victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence in Connecticut.

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